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Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher, eds., *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*. Philadelphia: De Capo Press, 2013. Pp. xvii, 234. ISBN 978-0-306-82176-9.

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As students of military affairs are well aware, getting at the reality of war through expository writing is a challenge, demanding painstaking research. Thus veterans have often turned to fiction to relate their battlefield experiences. The works of James Jones, Kurt Vonnegut, Jim Webb, and Tim O'Brien¹ come to mind. In recent years, veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have taken up their pens to share the truth of their wartime service. *Fire and Forget*, the first fiction anthology by veterans of the “Long War,” covers an array of subjects, from the intensity of combat to the difficulties of reintegration back home. In their struggle to extract meaning from their experiences, the authors give a personal face to America’s most recent wars. Their service lends their words authority and authenticity; *Fire and Forget* will give readers a better understanding of America’s twenty-first-century wars and their aftermath.

The book had its roots in the New York University Veterans Writing Workshop, a free program open to anyone who had served in the military overseas. Participants met weekly to read and critique each other’s work. In early 2011, six members of the workshop decided to publish an anthology of their best work. To make the collection more representative, they solicited contributions from veterans across the country. The result is fifteen short stories by fourteen soldiers and Marines and one military spouse. The authors’ military specialties include infantry, artillery, public affairs, law, and special operations. Some served in Iraq, others in Afghanistan, a few in both. Thus, each story provides a unique snapshot of the wars. As a veteran, I can attest to their accuracy.

Editors Roy Scranton and Matt Gallagher, themselves Iraq War veterans and contributors to the volume, describe the project as a search for truth through fiction. A primary goal was to bridge the gap between the members of military and the society they serve. “It seems to me [Scranton] that the most important cultural fact about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is how little most Americans had to do with them, how disconnected we were and are.” Many of the stories highlight the “radical fissure between *over here* and *over there*.” For the veterans who worked on the project,

There’s one world over there they’ve adapted to, where violence is regular, death is a constant, and the very landscape is hostile—a world where human fate is subject to chance, brute force, necessity, and military hierarchy, and America represents naked geopolitical power. Then there’s this world, over here, where you’re constantly bombarded with advertisements, merchandise, and titillation, and America is a fuzzy feeling used to sell cars and political candidates. Over there, you choose whether or not to shoot a speeding van that might contain a bomb ... or a frightened family.... Over here, you choose between five hundred TV shows and forty kinds of energy drink.²

Roughly half the stories are set in the United States, as veterans struggle to reintegrate into society. For example, Siobhan Fallon’s “Tips for a Smooth Transition” depicts the awkwardness of a young couple’s post-deployment reunion from the perspective of a military spouse. The wife finds the army’s stock advice—“When your soldier returns, take it easy, take it slow”—less than helpful (21). Some of the other guidance offered—to hide knives and guns and to have a quick exit plan should her husband become violent—is downright scary.

1. Respectively, *The Thin Red Line* (NY: Scribner’s, 1962), *Slaughterhouse-Five* (NY: Delacorte, 1969), *Fields of Fire* (NY: Bantam, 1978), and *The Things They Carried* (NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990).

2. Taken from an interview with Gallagher and Scranton provided to me by Da Capo Press.

Along these same lines, Phil Klay's "Redeployment" describes the shock his Marine protagonist feels in suddenly returning home from a war zone. He captures every detail of the trip from Iraq to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina: the booze-soaked refueling stop in Ireland, his feelings as he surrenders the rifle he has carried for so long, the welcoming family members holding colorful signs, his emotions as he holds his wife after months of sleeping on cots or the hard ground, and the classes he must take on not killing himself or beating his wife and children. According to the narrator, "Getting back feels like your first breath after nearly drowning. Even if it hurts, it's good" (47).

Other stories examine assimilation to normalcy over the longer term. In Colby Buzzell's "Play the Game," the protagonist, a former infantryman, wanders the streets of Los Angeles in a fruitless search for a job that pays more than minimum wage and for the car he has misplaced during a night of heavy drinking. Andrew Slater's "New Me" tells of a soldier who has suffered a traumatic brain injury and can no longer distinguish dreams from reality. The most powerful of the reintegration stories is Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train." The main character, who has witnessed a close friend killed by a suicide bomber, now spends her days aimlessly riding the subway, wondering whether she could have done anything to prevent it. Although she is no longer in a combat zone, "Fear seems to be the only thing she feels anymore" (66). Something as trivial as the stomping by a child in the apartment above hers can lead to a flashback. "At any given moment she exists at the very same place she existed in Iraq, the exact same instant that she stood over Kavanagh bleeding out" (60). Like Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim, she becomes "unstuck in time."

The pieces set in Iraq and Afghanistan are similarly compelling. In "Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere," Jacob Siegel, a veteran of both Iraq and Afghanistan, relates the frustrations of dealing with an elusive enemy whose preferred tactics are sniping, planting IEDs, and hit and run attacks. At times, it seemed the road itself was the enemy: "For us, there had been no fields of battle to frame the enemy. There was no chance to throw yourself against another man and fight for life. Our shocks of battle came on the road, brief, dark, and anonymous. We were always on the road and it could always explode" (11). How to make sense of a conflict that took the lives and limbs of your fellow soldiers but offered precious few opportunities to shoot back?

In one of the more creative contributions, "When Engaging Targets, Remember," Gavin Ford Kovite uses the "Choose Your Own Adventure" format to capture the challenges faced by a turret gunner who has only moments to decide whether to fire on an approaching vehicle. Although the Army has provided him with detailed, step-by-step Rules of Engagement, they are little help in "a landscape in which every enemy appears by design to be a civilian, which means that every civilian appears as a possible enemy" (171). The soldier finds himself in a no-win situation: "if you are fast on the trigger, you will end up stopping car bombers but killing civilians, doing al-Qaeda's work for it. If you hold your fire past the point of no return, you will start to get hit more often as al-Qaeda realizes that convoys are soft targets. It is the other asymmetry of this type of asymmetric warfare: heads they win, tails you lose" (170).

Roman Skaskiw's "Television" portrays a young lieutenant attempting to comfort an Iraqi family whose son has accidentally been shot by American troops. The lieutenant's task is all the more difficult because one of his squad leaders considers all Iraqis to be the enemy and is not shy about expressing his views. Taken together, the stories set in-country accurately depict the obscenity, absurdity, and tragedy of war.

Although *Fire and Forget* makes a valuable contribution to the conversation on recent US wars, the collection has two weaknesses. First, it is too dark, its characters too broken. None have moved through the pain to find peace. None have healthy relationships with civilian friends and family members. And, in at least five of the stories, a veteran uses violence inappropriately. By portraying such extreme cases, the stories risk perpetuating the myth of the maladjusted veteran. Most of the men and women I served with are now productive members of society. To be sure, many had their difficulties, especially when they first returned, but substance abuse and violent outbursts were not the norm. By contrast, none of the characters in *Fire and Forget* has successfully re-acclimated to civilian life. There is little here that is redemptive or positive, just a lot of damaged individuals who cannot put themselves back together.

The second weakness is that, aside from Siobhan Fallon and Mariette Kalinowski, most of the authors are young, white males who have served in ground combat. Missing are, for example, pilots and sailors, older soldiers and Marines with families at home, and the children, siblings, and parents of deployed service members, not to mention the voices of Iraqis and Afghans. To their credit, the editors indicate that they will seek out other perspectives in a future collection; I look forward to reading what they come up with.

The anthology well achieves what it sets out to do: reveal the truth and the meaning of the authors' wartime experiences. Readers will certainly get a sense of what it was like to walk in their shoes. There are no heroes or villains here, just human beings with all their strengths and frailties. For teachers, *Fire and Forget* will be an invaluable supplement to the more conventional historical narratives, journal articles, and documentaries on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, by vividly personalizing the war in a way that nonfiction cannot.